BARAKAT

MIRROR OF ALL AGES & CULTURES

AFRICAN ART

CATALOGUE
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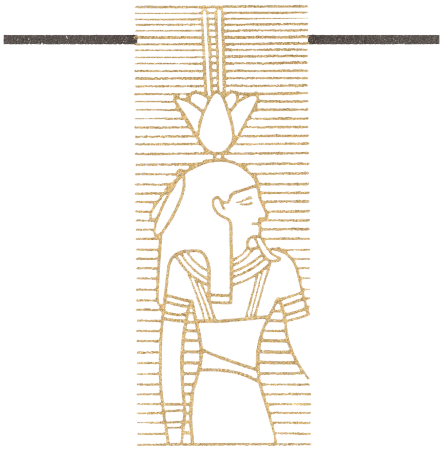

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MASKS

This beautiful and elegant mask was made by the Bambara (or Bamana) people of Mali, and is an exceptional example of the genre. It comprises a large face-mask backing, domed in the centre and bearing a small antelope's head, in highly polished wood that contrasts with the matte texture of the backing. The mask is dominated by a spectacular pair of barley-twist antelope horns that extend upward and slightly outward, their surfaces ripples with superb detailing, the top one fifth of their total height being plain as they would be in the live animal. The head is very angular and expressionist, with the planes and angles being very clearly defined. The patination is superb.

This mask, however, poses something of a quandary. It is the closest match to the Komo mask, which is as long and may well have been worn in the same manner. However, the Komo variant is notable for its somewhat hideous appearance, which is heightened by the application of organic matter and an encrusted patina. The antelope connection relates it to the Chi Wara headrests, which were controlled and danced by the Chi-Wara-Ton society. Their pieces, which are highly abstracted, are named "chiwara" for "labouring wild animal" and refers to a half-man, half antelope that was born of Mousso Koroni (a sky goddess) and an earth spirit in the form of a cobra. Chiwara then taught the Bamana how to farm, and is worshipped accordingly. This is clearly not a Chi-Wara headcrest, but it may be related in some way to the society.

Whatever its function, this is an exceptionally beautiful piece of African art.

Bambara Antelope Mask, 19th Century CE - 20th Century CE
Wood and Paint
71.1 x 23.5 cm
28 x 9 1/4 in
(PF.1256 (LSO))

Masks are unique in the world of art in their expression of complex emotions directly related to a particular event. A masquerade with many masks involved creates a different 'world', where viewer and participant interact emotionally and often times physically. This very delightful mask shows a Western influence in the facial features, and in the use of paint which the Europeans introduced. The particular markings indicating eyelashes, plus the addition of hair for the moustache and goatee further heighten this impression. Using black as a form of delineation the artist has given the character great expression, particularly in the curved black lines around the cheeks and the broad eyebrows. The combined effect of the superb craftsmanship presents a face we are very comfortable with, as if he is a beloved uncle come to see us during festival time. Wherever he next visits he is certain to bring laughter and merriment to everyone.

Ibibio Wooden Polychrome Mask, 20th Century CE
Wood
34.3 x 43.2 cm
13 1/2 x 17 in
(PF.4833)

This remarkable piece is an exceptional "gelede" mask from the Yoruba of Nigeria. It is designed along traditional lines, as a large helmet mask with a high coiffure and a naturalistic human face. However, the face is exceptionally serene and well-modelled, with very bright and contrasting colouring of the face, eyes and triple vertical scars that adorn each cheek. The hair is modelled as a low, domed transverse crest, halved in the midline by a central, longitudinal crest; both are decorated with incised decoration. The base of the piece is lined with a large, cushioned pad of textile, decorated with cowrie shells and metal bells. This is an unusual detail for this form of mask, and the implications are of wealth as cowries were used as money in this area of West Africa.

This mask is intimately associated with rituals performed by men's societies within the Yoruba polity. Specifically, Gelede is intended to honour the spiritual aspects of femininity, and to prevent this from becoming destructive to the society to which they belong. Angered female spirits (Aje) may destroy entire communities; for this reason, they are placated by dancing performances so that their power is directed towards the benefits of the group. Each village and area had distinctive patterns of Gelede masks that reflect some facet of their social organisation or mythology. The mask would have been worn with a large cloth costume that would have covered the masquerade dancer and concealed their identity.

Yoruba Wooden Polychrome Gelede Mask, 20th Century CE
Wood, Mixed Media
26.7 x 41.9 cm
10 1/2 x 16 1/2 in
(PF.5405 (LSO))

This mask was made by the Baule of the Ivory Coast area and is characterised by heavy eyelids, and a long slim nose which leads to the pouted lips. The mask is surmounted by an elaborate head-dress with eight spears over a cresscent.

The Baule live across the Ivory Coast area, and have an economy based primarily on sedentary agriculturism. They have thus been able to build up a considerable political and economic stronghold, which has in turn given rise to a strong ritual and artistic heritage. Their own creation story relates to an ancient migration, in which the queen was forced to sacrifice her son in order to ford a mighty river. So upset was she that all she could say was baouli (the child is dead), thus giving rise to the tribe's name.

The fact that many such pieces have a centuries-old patina from handling and libations would seem to suggest that pieces can be inherited, and that the sculptures can either contain more than one spouse, or that s/he can be replaced by the spouse of the new owner. This is particularly the case with valuable or very well-carved pieces. Like most other human societies, the Baule are prey to conspicuous consumption, which is a central key to asserting one's status in the village, and thus one's power and influence. While their carving is among the most refined and restrained in Africa, therefore, artists vie to produce more impressive and beautiful carvings which are often decorated or adorned by their proud owners.

The function of this mask would seem to be diplomatic, probably worn to receive important dignitaries. This is an exceptionally striking example, and a superb addition to any discerning collection.

Baule Wooden Mask, 19th to early 20th Century CE
Wood
39 x 16 cm
15 3/8 x 6 1/4 in
(ES.6680)

This serene bicephalous mask was made by the Baule of the Ivory Coast area. It is in the semi helmet-mask format, with a dorsal enclosure extending halfway down the masks length. The heads are joined at the apex and across the bottom section of the mask; there is a division between them at about cheek height. The faces are male (right) and female (left), denoted by the presence/absence of a three-section beard. The faces are otherwise virtually identical in terms of size (the male is very slightly taller), shape, proportions and decoration. Even the expressions match. Each face is slightly concave from a bulbous brow, with high, double-arched brows leading to an elongated nose, large, closed eyes, small, pursed lips and keloid scarifications. These are by the sides of the mouth (vertical hatched rectangle with trefoil rays), below the eyes (horizontal hatched rectangle), by the eyes (trefoil rays) and on the forehead (four small hatched blocks curving over each brow). The hair is perfectly symmetrical, with a high, centrally-parted crest decorated with vertical incised lines of exceptional fineness. The lateral aspect of the head (and the central, although not as clearly visible) is rendered as seven stripes of cross-hatched hair being pulled back towards the rear of the mask. The coiffure is separated from the forehead by a line of thin, twine-like beading. The ears are small and flat to the head. The perimeter of the mask's body is pierced with multiple holes with evidence of usage. This is backed up with a notable dark patina on the masks surface, which is absent on the body, perhaps denoting the line of the costume with which this was originally worn.

Baule Bicephalous Wooden Mask, 20th Century CE
Wood
45.7 x 29.8 cm
18 x 11 3/4 in
(PF.3167 (LSO))

The Dan use masks during funerals, initiations and various celebrations, all of which involve dance and occasionally pantomime. Stylistic details indicate the function of the mask and its particular role in an event. This handsome mask is distinguished by its round eyes, as opposed to the fine slits of the Deangle mask. An overhanging forehead sets the eyes into even deeper relief, the nose turns upwards at the tip, and the lips are very full with a cleft on the upper portion. The beard of raffia fibre adds height and dimension, and also designates this mask as masculine. The Gunyega rules over the footraces of young initiates, representing a masked spirit that must compete against unmasked runners. In this context, it must be a suitable "medium" for a spirit who partakes in human activities, conveying a feeling of the physical and non-physical worlds. In both senses this mask performs admirably.

Dan Wooden Gunyega Mask with Raffia Beard, 1900 CE - 1930 CE
Wood, Raffia
40.6 x 20.3 cm
16 x 8 in
(PF.4990)

This powerfully-carved antelope mask was made by the Bambara (or Bamana) people of Mali. It is an exceptional example, depicting a male Greater Kudu with massive, imposing horns and pricked ears. The face is striped with black and white pigment, the horns – which have a barley-twist pattern – in black, and the ears and the apex of the head in a wood/red/brown colour. The very tips of the horns have been damaged during usage. This is a very naturalistic representation when compared to most Bambara/Bamana antelope pieces, such as the famous Chi-Wara headdresses that are traditionally worn by secret society members in dances to encourage good crop yields.

This piece would have been worn for a masquerade performance associated with ceremonial celebrations among the Bamana/Bambara. It is an elegant and sophisticated piece of African art and a worthy addition to any collection or domestic setting.

Bambara Mask of an Antelope Head, 20th Century CE
Wood
101.6 x 28.6 cm
40 x 11 1/4 in
(PF.1267 (LSO))

WOODEN ARTWORKS

This magnificent zoomorphic stool was made by the Asante, one of the numerous tribes that make up the Akan polity of Ghana. It is an exceptional example. The general format is traditional, with a flat base and a seat with upwardly-curved sides. The seat and base are separated by a snarling lion standing four-square, with a ruffed mane, open mouth and carefully picked-out facial features. The colour and patina are exceptional.

Stools such as this were used to assert status in many African tribal groups; only elites, and especially chiefs, were allowed to use them. Very often they were not sat upon, but were just displayed as regalia. This explains the often spindly and somewhat insubstantial construction of earlier examples. The various animals and humans that support the seat represent something of the ancestry of the stool's owner, or reflect his authority. The implications of the lion - a legendarily powerful beast - are obvious.

The Akan are a loose assemblage of tribes – including the Akuapem, the Akyem, the Ashanti, the Baoulé, the Anyi, the Brong, the Fante and the Nzema – that share general cultural trends while maintaining separate tribal identities. Their society is highly ritualised, with numerous gods under a main deity, Onyame. The society is ruled by Asantahenes, and a host of minor chiefs who claim royal status through their connection with the land and the founders of villages upon it. One factor that unites the Akan is the fact that they took a golden stool as their emblem and rose up against the European invaders in the 18th century. They have also staved off interest from Northern Islamic groups. The main reason for this imperial interest was the long history of gold mining and gold working in the area, which has been taking place for at least 600 years. As is apparent, they also manufactured regalia in other materials.

This stool would have been treated with the same reverence that a throne might attract in western European groups, as it was literally that important. From an aesthetic point of view, it is a striking and attractive piece of secular art, and a worthy addition to any collection or sophisticated domestic setting.

Asante Wooded Stool Supported by a Lion, 20th Century CE
(DV.333 (LSO))

The Senufo group, based in the Ivory Coast and Mali area, has a long history of using highly decorated objects in many aspects of everyday life. However, their extremely high level of skill in woodcarving is nowhere better seen than in the realm of their magical-religious art. At the heart of Senufo society is a patriarchal groups of elders known as the Poro society, which is responsible for many religious and more urbane functions to do with the running of the tribal group. Their ceremonial events are often associated with dancing and music.

Senufo Wooden Sculpture of a Bird, 20th Century CE
Brass-Plaited Wood
81.3 x 30.5 x 20.3 cm
32 x 12 x 8 in
(X.1047)

Through art we can become quiet observers of a domestic scene, and there are few sights more touching than a woman breast feeding her baby. In her gentle repose this dignified mother allows us to be part of an intimate moment in her life. She is naked from the waist up, with a thick band around her stomach and bracelets on her upper arms. By curving the biceps the sculptor has shown the tightening of the bracelets, while continuing the overall curvature of form, descending in a beautiful flowing motion around the hips and thighs. The conical shape achieves its highest expression in the beautiful headdress. This lovely adornment perfectly mirrors her oval face, offering a marvelous sense of harmony and balance, continued in the enlarged breast which the baby suckles. The Senufo carvers, kulebele, created statues for various cults linked with agricultural work, used in festivities and fertility cults. Growth of the soil in the form of life sustaining food is linked with the seed of man growing inside the woman, both are the life force blossoming for the general good of the community. And both are of great importance deserving the sculptor's consummate skills. Often ancestors are depicted as ideal models expressing admired values and virtues, such as motherhood. This superb statue embodies the essence of maternity- palpable and stirring, a woman content in the pride of motherhood which transports her to another level of deep inner peace, seen in the blissful expression on her face.

Senufo Wooden Maternity Sculpture, 18th Century AD to 19th Century AD
Wood
(PH.0258)

The Baga people dwelt around the marshy lagoons of the coastal region of Guinea-Bissau. Due to the nature of their climate, for six months of the year their land was flooded. In order to survive and prosper, the women of the villages would plant rice in the swampy areas created by their Mother Earth. The female element of nature heightened the female figure and form to a position of admiration and reverence. Baga ceremonies and rituals connect with this theme of fertility and maternity and have created such magnificent artworks as this passionate and lively drum.

The belly of the drum is decorated with serpents moving sinuously in a circle. These serpents represent the fertility of the land for the Baga people. Below the belly of the drum is a kneeling female figure. The artist has endowed this youthful beauty with a voluptuous form and a timeless sense of dignity and grace.
Her presence is coupled with the ceremonial regalia adorned upon her. Her coiffed hair, necklace, and armbands identify her as an object of beauty and devotion. The superb artistry that captured this fertile woman has captured for an eternity her magical presence. We cannot pay witness to the magical ceremonies once performed with this drum; however, we can admire the eternal life captured within the form of this awe-inspiring woman. We stand before her and she is motionless, yet we still feel the vibrations of the drum and its timeless beat.

Baga Wooden Polychrome Drum, 19th Century CE - 20th Century CE
Wood
124.5 x 36.8 cm
49 1/8 x 14 1/2 in
(PF.4811)

This unusual figure of a man mounted on what appears to be a pig is a magical device from the Kongo kingdom. The figure's abdomen bears a magical protuberance that represents an addition often made from magical items – such as grave earth from the grave of an important person, blood and other organic material – that was affixed as a lump to the figure, thus endowing it with power. Sometimes substituted with magical materials such as glass or mirrors, the "bilongo" was the most significant part of these figures, which were appealed to for supernatural help in times of adversity. Some variants were perforated with nails or otherwise damaged in order to awake the wrath of the spirit to go forth and smite the object of the plaintiff's complaints; the current piece, with its stylistic features, mirror, and lack of nails, is stylistically more akin to the Vili tribal style. The figure is carved from a light wood, and depicts a man seated upon the back of a pig. His right hand is raised above his shoulder and is socketed, implying that it once held a weapon. The face is turned slightly upwards and bears an aggressive expression with open mouth and staring eyes. He is evidently of high status, with three bracelets on his right wrist, one armlet on his left bicep and an ornate feather headdress that has been applied to the figure using a textile band. He is otherwise naked, his body roughly in proportion although somewhat dwarfed by his head, with smoothing and blurring of anatomical details such as musculature. The midriff bears a box-like arrangement with a fragment of mirror, upon which he is resting his left hand. The animal upon which he sits is out of proportion to his stature – reminiscent of Yoruba equestrian figures – with a snub nose, short, thick legs and nugatory detailing. While unpainted, the entire piece has been polished to a dull shine, accentuated with the remnants of white pigment – perhaps kaolin – that have remained in the fissures between the limbs etc.

Kongo Wooden Nkisi Sculpture of a Rider, 20th Century CE
Wood and Feather
49.2 x 15.2 cm
19 3/8 x 6 in
(PF.3928 (LSO))

This imposing semi-helmet mask was made by the Malinke (or Maninka) people of West Africa. It is an exceptionally dominant piece. It has a broad, flat face with a wide nose, slit eyes and a bulging forehead, all covered (and defined, in the case of the eyes) with applied metal plates decorated with hammered, incised markings. The forehead is decorated with three saw-edges strips, while strips define the nose, cheeks and mouth. The wood is also decorated with punched awl marks. The face is dominated by a pair of tall horns that sweep upwards and backwards. The edges of the rear are well worn, and the perimeter is surrounded with a series of holes that imply the attachment of a costume. The surface is very dark, through a combination of stain and use-wear.

The Malinke are distributed as a minority in Guinea, Mali, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, Gambia, and smaller groups in Sierra Leone, B.Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Ghana. They are part of the Mande group, and stem from an 8th century AD entity known as the Malinke Empire, which was a very powerful trading body. Modern Malinke are agriculturists, and live in male-dominated, hierarchical societies. Despite their population size and wide distribution, their contribution to Africa's artistic heritage is minimal, as they are predominantly Muslim and believe that representative arts fly in the face of Islamic convention. This mask is therefore something of a rarity.

Its significance is uncertain. Before being colonised by Muslim groups, the populations in this area were polytheist and "idolatrous", but their art has been destroyed and the traditions abandoned. This piece could be either an anecdotal object, or a memorial object from a lost cultural heritage. Its demonic appearance says something about what it was meant to represent – power, evil, males, or the strength of nature – although we are unsure about how it was used, beyond being a masquerade object. This is a rare and unusual piece of African art.

Malinke Wooden Horned Mask, 20th Century CE
Wood and Brass
34.3 x 61 cm
13 1/2 x 24 in
(PF.4010 (LSO))

Standing female figure with fairly naturalistic proportions and hands firmly clasped on the hips.
Highly stylized and elaborate hairstyle in the form of five braided threads, terminating at the beginning of the nape.
Scarification marks in the shape of semilunar keloid lesions surface in low relief on both the cheeks and the high forehead.
Delicate facial features, with arched eyebrows, symmetrical almond-shape eyes, the iris painted black against a white-painted pupil, eyelashes are indicated by tiny vertical incisions, narrow nose, finely cut mouth with thin lips. Both ears are placed much forward on the temples and appear prominently.
Several "lines of beauty" adorn the statuette's neck.
Breasts are firm and pointed, with areolas painted in black. Slightly protruding belly with the navel designated in black.
She is wearing a simple loin cloth in black and white.
Powerful legs, rather large feet, clad in black sandals with yellow decoration. Immediately below the knees, bands of black cloth.
Nails and toes are all painted in white and the articulation of each digit is clearly illustrated by pairs of diminutive horizontal lines. The body posture is far from naturalistic, possibly also for practical reasons, as to offer a much better stability to the statue. This colourful artwork has been carved by the Baule, an African tribe inhabiting a part of the eastern Côte d'Ivoire between the Comoé and Bandama rivers that is both forest and savanna land. The ancestors of the Baule were a section of the Asante who immigrated to their present location under the leadership of Queen Awura Pokou about 1750, following a dispute over the chieftaincy. The story of the tribe's creation is closely related to this particular ancient migration moment, in which the queen was forced to sacrifice her son in order to ford a mighty river. So devastated was she by her loss that all she could say was "baouli" (the child is dead), thus giving rise to the tribe's name. The Baule continued to rule much of Côte d'Ivoire until the end of the 19th century. As a tribe they are also much celebrated for their fine wooden sculpture, particularly for their ritual statuettes representing ghosts or spirits and carved ceremonial masks, all associated with the ancestor cult.

Standing female Baule statue, 1890 CE - 1920 CE
Wood, paint
height 53.8 cm
height 21 1/4 in
(PF.4501)

This unusual sculpture must represent a natural spirit. Perhaps a diviner also conjured its magical power. Clearly, a great force radiates from within. The carving bears the mark of the Senufo, from the elongated torso to the crescent headdresses. The decorative scarifications found on the body and face are also typical of the Senufo, including the marks around the navel, the arches on the back of her shoulders, the curving lines under her eyes, and the slashes at the sides of her mouth. What is the significance of the three heads? This fact alone must identify the figure as a spirit of sorts. She appears a bit frightening. Her protruding mouth is open, bearing her teeth. Her globular eyes also have a sinister, almost hypnotic, gaze beneath the folds of her eyelids and the arches of her brows. Her long, sinuous arms hold two bracelets while her hands rest on her knees. She is seated upon a small stool, decorated by a carved band with a zigzag pattern. While the identity and powers of this spirit are a mystery, she is definitely someone you do not want to anger.

Senufo Woman with Three Heads, 20th Century CE
Wood
74.9 x 11.4 cm
29 1/2 x 4 1/2 in
(PF.5725)

This colourful and demonic-looking polychrome figure was made by Bangwa group of the Cameroonian Grasslands. It comprises a male humanoid figure with solid, straight legs, a corpulent waistline, hands gathered on the abdomen and a domed, alien-like head with large eyes and open mouth. The arms spring directly from the jawline. The figure is mainly white with sporadic dots of darker colours. There are bright purple-blue eminences on each thigh, a colour which also occurs on the lips and the lids of the red-rimmed eyes.

The Bamun are one of the three simplified groups in the Grasslands: Bamileke, Bamum, and Bamenda Tikar. They originated towards the north and have been moving south for three hundred years. Their economy is based upon agriculture, which gave rise to great wealth and thus a complex social system. Village chiefs are known as "fons", and are responsible for dispensing justice and administering "his" (i.e. the village's) land. His power is moderated by secret societies, although he is technically in charge of these.

Bamin religion is centred on a god named Si, but is more referent to ancestor worship. Ancestors are usually addressed through their skulls, which are kept by the eldest living male in each lineage. Major Bangwa artworks include dancing queen figures, which are displayed only during the funerals of fons. Smaller pieces such as this have less well-defined functions but are generally believed to commemorate important actual or mythical ancestors.

This is a striking and interesting piece of African art.

Bangwa Wooden Polychrome Sculpture, 20th Century CE
Wood, Paint
111.8 x 35.6 cm
44 1/8 x 14 1/8 in
(PF.5963 (LSO))

This sculpture of an old man is a symbol for the wisdom of the ages. He is probably an effigy of an ancestor or village elder, holding his long beard with both hands, emphasizing the power of his ancient wisdom. A furrowed brow created by incisions above the nose, reveal many years of contemplation and introspection. Deep-set eyes seem to look both inward and into the distance--to places where normal eyes cannot see. The long, pointed nose adds a distinguished air; while a large mouth highlights the importance of words he seems about to speak. This is a man who dwells in the realm of dreams. He is someone who has surpassed the physical world in order to explore the realm of the spirit.

Yaka Wooden Ancestral Sculpture, 20th Century CE
Wood
33 x 10.8 cm
13 x 4 1/4 in
(PF.4774)

This piece is a distinct example of the Kota art tradition, which includes a long, oval-shaped face with large, circular eyes and a triangular nose. The surface also sometimes includes decorative striations or geometric patterns, which can be seen on this piece. Almost all Kota pieces are rare as many traditional practices – including masquerades and the reliquary system – have been either suppressed or have gone out of fashion. To compound matters, many older items were intentionally destroyed in the 1940s to 1960s by the "Culte de Demoiselles", who went out of their way to destroy traditional culture in an attempt to mimic western lifestyles.

The Kota live in Eastern Gabon, and are comprised of various subunits including Ndambomo, Mahongwe, Ikota-la- hua, Sake, Menzambi and Bougom, some of which can also be differentiated artistically. Their society is largely egalitarian and gerontocratic, their economy based upon hunting and agriculture. Their relaxed social structure reflects their previous mobility – they moved into the area from the North during the 18th century – which is also perhaps the cause behind their unusual mortuary rituals in which they were basically able to take their ancestors with them wherever they went.

The Kota originally exposed their dead, but started to bury them following influence from neighbouring groups. The remains (especially skulls) of prominent personages were then exhumed and placed into baskets (Bwete), which were defended by carved figures decorated with metal plates or wire. A figure such as this one would sit on top of the reliquary as a means of protection. These figures diversified according to the geographical distribution of the subgroups—together they are among the most famous and recognizable symbols of African art. Their radical deconstruction of the human form is fascinating to historians of African art and had an enormous influence on the 20th century development of Western art styles.

Kota Reliquary Figure, 20th Century AD
Brass Plated Wood
61 x 29.2 cm
24 x 11 1/2 in
(PH.0296)

Many African tribes preferred to think of the spirits of their ancestors collectively rather than in terms of separate individuals. This is the result of the animism that underlies their religious beliefs. Such religious beliefs have been termed "animism" because they believed that a spirit exists in every living thing. Spirits dwell in the earth, in rivers and lakes, in the rain, in the sun and moon; still others demand to be appeased in order to promote fertility or cure disease. Their dwelling places may be given the shape of human figures, such as this glorious fertility sculpture depicting a standing woman. In this case, such spirits sometimes achieve enough of a stable identity to be viewed as rudimentary deities. Like many other neighboring tribes from the Ivory Coast, the Djimini (also spelled Dyimini) people believed that the spirits of the deceased continued to play an active role in the life of their descendants. By creating memorial sculptures and presenting it with proper sacrifices and libations, the relatives of the deceased could influence the favor of the spirit. Judging by the beauty and social position of this woman, there is no doubt that she would have continued to play a major role within society even after her bodily departure. She holds on hand on top of her belly while the other rests comfortably at her side. Her hair has been intricately woven into a series of braided crests that accentuate her beauty. Decorative scarification, considered both beauty marks and signs of rank, cover much of her face as well as her stomach. The series of three scars that fan out from the corner of her lips are uniquely Djimini. This gorgeous sculpture is the idealized form of feminine beauty that honors the ancestors of the past so that they might beneficially influence the future of the family and the tribe as a whole.

Djimini Wooden Sculpture of a Woman, 20th Century CE
Wood
57.1 x 13.3 cm
22 1/2 x 5 1/4 in
(PF.6309)

This impressive sculpture of a woman pounding grain using a pestle and mortar was made by the Senufo group of the Ivory Coast area. The figure is traditionally Senufo in terms of elongated proportions, a long torso and shorter legs, while the downturned, delicately rendered face and detailed coiffure are also characteristic. She is very curvilinear in design, with prominent breasts and protuberant abdomen, reiterating the fertility-linked iconography typical of female Senufo sculptures. The piece is secular in that it does not seem to be linked to any known Senufo religious or ritual tradition, although it may refer to an ancestress or other important person from Senufo history.

Pieces such as this are not as well known as the standard Senufo icon – pombilele, or rhythm pounders – although in representing half of an ancestor couple the intellectual intention is much alike. At the heart of Senufo society is a patriarchal group of elders known as the Poro, which is responsible for many religious and secular functions to do with the running of the tribal group. Smaller-scale magical issues, however, are usually dealt with by diviners or soothsayers (sandoo). Figures representing ancestors and spirits are used both centrally and in individual homes.

Senufo Wooden Sculpture of a Woman Pounding Grain, 20th Century CE
Wood
76.8 x 20.3 cm
30 1/4 x 8 in
(PF.4748 (LSO))

Elegantly decorated, this beautiful staff was an important part of numerous ceremonies. The two figures on the top portion of the staff represent two Yoruba deities of high importance, commanding great respect. These deities would act as protectors and defenders; therefore, very important not only to the owner of the staff but also to the entire village. The powers of the gods had tremendous influence on the people of the society, controlling their every move, like the sun, moon, and weather. Such power demanded the respect of the followers, which was readily given.

The lower portion of the staff is hollowed, displaying a series of four wooden balls. These would ultimately make a distinctive sound with every subtle movement. This sound reverberating throughout a ceremony would create a tremendous reaction due to its importance. The staff in its entirety has been beautifully hand crafted with great attention to detail, particularly to the male and female deities for whom the ceremony was created. This staff is only one portion of a very important ceremony. With such beauty in just one piece one can imagine how beautiful the rest of the ceremony proceedings might be.

Yoruba Wooden Ceremonial Staff, 19th Century CE - 20th Century CE
Wood
114.3 x 18.7 cm
45 x 7 3/8 in
(PF.4695)

TERRACOTTAS

This impressive two-spouted ceramic vessel appears to have been made by one of the numerous Grasslands groups of Cameroon, specifically the Bamileke or Bamun people. It is essentially a cimple globular form, with an incised decoration pedestal base and a rounded top. The ground is undecorated, except for a series of incised chevrons around the shoulders – from whence the paired spouts emerge – and a row of beading that connects the aforementioned bands through the space made by the spouts. These are plain, and connected superiorly by an arched handle which is clad in raffia. The spouts are stopped by bird's heads, which are attached to the handle by lengths of raffia twine. The Grasslands contains numerous small, quasi- independent kingdoms, notably the Bamileke, the Bamenda-Tikar and the Bamum. The king/fon/leader of the group and his courtly associates are equipped with regalia and prestige objects, leading to a proliferation of craftsmen and artists who occupied valuable social roles within the community. Even secular objects are decorated with characteristically Grasslands iconography, although function cannot always be ascertained, as in the current case.
Given the peculiar nature of its construction it is likely to have occupied a supra-secular function, perhaps for administering libations or sharing valuable liquids such as wine. Whatever its purpose, it is an attractive and impressive piece of African art.

Grasslands Terracotta Vessel with Two Spouts and Bird-Headed Stoppers, 20th Century CE
Terracotta
25.4 x 25.4 cm
10 x 10 in
(MT.304 (LSO))

The Mangbetu moved to the Congo region from Sudan in the 1700s, and live in societies that revolve around a court system. They are particularly renowned for their professional musicians, and also for their extravagant dancing and ceremonial pageantry. Their artworks were produced for the royal court families, and ranged from architecture to objects of religious/spiritual significance and secular items decorated with pleasing motifs and designs.

Mangbetu art is perhaps most recognizable for the inverted-cone coiffures of the (usually female) figures that tend to adorn it. This is seen in the rare wooden figures, as well as in ceramics. The coiffure – exaggerated by cranial deformation during infancy – was worn by women until the 1950s. Most of the pieces found their way to the royal courts. Kings were originally believed to be semi-divine, able to control natural resources using magical objects such as leopard parts. Mangbetu resistance to European rule had serious socioeconomic repercussions, but by the time that the European hold on the area had solidified, the Mangbetu were in the habit of trading and exchanging prestige goods – notably ornate ceramics – between chiefly courts and to colonials.

The role of these pieces is uncertain. The Mangbetu creator god is named Noro (also Kilima), but there is little sculptural abstraction in Mangbetu art that hints at an aim beyond the representational, or the secular decorative. They may also represent ancestors, which the kings usually command be revered. It is possible that the decorations on such pieces are designed to repel the negative effects of 'Likundu' – evil spirits – or witchery, which is a major concern in Mangbetu society.

Mangbetu Anthropomorphic Vessel, 20th Century CE
Terracotta
20.3 x 39.4 x 20.3 cm
8 x 15 1/2 x 8 in
(CK.0406)

METALWORKS

This striking bronze/brass head reflects a major tradition in West African cultural heritage, in terms of aesthetics and technological innovation. The Ife manner of depicting the human form was unique in its time and has been constantly referred back to by every major school of artistic representation. Within the Ife-Yoruba-Benin polity the features have been absorbed and are often reiterated in agglomerative sculptural forms, as in the present case.

The gracility of this piece suggests that it might represent a woman, although most of the highly ornate pieces currently known are of males. The brows are relatively light, but the lips, nose and chin are unusually thick and robust. The cheekbones are high, and the eyes narrow – both of these characteristics usually implies a woman rather than a man, although we are not fully aware of the whole range of Ife stylistic methods. Perhaps most striking about this piece is the meticulous vertical impressed lines – representing scarifications – that cover the entire face other than the eyes and the lips, which are also decorated with much finer incisions. The piece is surmounted by an ornate hat, or perhaps crown, made of fibrous material in vertical orientation with a medium brim and a central diadem with a spike (made of what appears to be a woven material) rising vertically into the air. It superficially resembles a coral crown as worn by later Benin kings, although the diadem/spike arrangement is uniquely Ife. The piece stands on an integral columnar neck with six horizontal bands of decoration and several large holes drilled around the perimeter of the base. The top of the head (hat) is open posteriorly, so that the piece resembles the tusk-bearing Oba heads used to decorate commemorative altars in Benin. The drill holes make it likely that the head was mounted onto a body made of some perishable material such as wood, or perhaps partially shrouded in textile.

The piece was produced using the comparatively crude method of cire perdue (lost wax) casting, in which a single, unique object is created from a single-use mould. It is crude in that most cultures are unable to make it especially thin in the mould, in order to capture fine, delicate surface detail. Early European explorers were so astonished by the fineness of these pieces that they refused to believe that the African populations had manufactured them, despite the fact that "classic" African features are depicted in every case. The Ife were also able to cast their pieces in almost pure bronze, without recourse to zinc that is used today to make the metal flow easier; they achieved this using multi-section crucibles and complex moulds, although the finer details of their craft still elude us. As suggested above, the piercings and the neck format imply a ceremonial role for the piece, perhaps as a ritual object that was displayed or paraded on special occasions. The personage portrayed is probably a member of the royal family, modeled from life. The proportions of the piece, however, imply that it might have been made at a slightly later date than "classic" Ife pieces, but there is no doubt that it was made within the cultural constraints of the Yoruba/Benin polities.

Ife Bronze Head, 16th Century CE - 18th Century CE
Bronze
38.1 x 15.2 cm
15 x 6 in
(CK.0068)

Ife, the capital and religious center of Southwest Nigeria, was one of the first Sub-Saharan cities to emerge at the end of the first millennium AD. A substantial number of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic sculptures, made most frequently in terracotta although brass was also employed, were produced in the region between the 11th and the 15th centuries. This distinctive style is broadly referred to as "Ife", even though some examples may come from other cities such as Owo. The brass objects especially are strikingly realistic, despite the fact they are almost certainly idealized portraits of dead kings, called Oni. The terracotta heads are more numerous and varied, no doubt a result of the comparative abundance and ease of working the material. Some of the faces, whether made of brass or terracotta, carry vertical parallel incisions, possibly representing scarification or body paint.

Ife Bronze Head, 13th Century CE - 15th Century CE
Bronze
27.9 x 16.5 cm
11 x 6 1/2 in
(CK.0543)

This beautiful bronze staff is known as an ipawo ase, or "hand-held staff of authority/ life force." It was used by individuals who possessed personal power or ase, including chiefs, priests, Osugbo elders and kings. The Yoruba believe the essential life force (ase) can be "harnessed" by a person through training, experience and initiation, and used to help others. During ceremonies a king might bless someone by pointing the staff towards them, thus transferring energy or ase from one to the other. The nearly identical faces on the top of this staff probably represent a generic ancestor or a deity, who is crowned by a knob with a slit down the center. Twin extensions from either side are hung with bells to announce the blessing and alert the spirits. The design on the lower section is similar to the patterns found bracelets and other objects. There is no doubt that through the medium of bronze this staff has acquired its own power, which is like ase itself--immutable, timeless and perfectly formed.

Yoruba Bronze Osugbo Staff, 1850 BCE - 1900 CE
Bronze
height 34.9 cm
height 13 3/4 in
(PF.4901)

This pair of monolithic sculptures representing a standing man and a woman was rendered in bronze/brass, and is a classic example of Dogon sculpture. It is simplified and deliberately attenuated, with long arms. The neck is elongated and columnar, supporting a small, compact head with a conical coiffure or headwear. The jawline is sharp, the face slightly upturned and sharp along the midline. The eyes are small, under incised arched brows which lend a slightly lugubrious expression to the face. The metal is nicely patinated, lending further emphasis to the linear construction. The function of the piece is uncertain; it may have been involved in a divination process, in the hands of the hogon (shaman), or as a talismanic object in the hands of a high-ranking member of Dogon society. Metal objects were especially expensive and luxurious, and this would therefore have been an important item when it was made.

Pair of Dogon Bronze Sculptures, 19th to early 20th century
Bronze
height 23.5 cm
height 9 1/4 in
(GM.0075)

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Ife Bronze Head, 19th to early 20th century CE
Bronze
height 37 cm
height 14 5/8 in
(ES.8611)

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